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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 001424

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: CONSIDERING THE SO-CALLED CONSENSUS
CANDIDATES

REF: BEIRUT 1422

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Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) As we have reported, March 14 leaders say that Nassib Lahoud is their first choice for president, with Boutros Harb the fall-back; March 8 leaders at least tactically suggest Michel Aoun is their only candidate. At the same time there is considerable talk by both sides about finding a consensus choice, an approach that presumably rules out those three as well as undeclared March 14 candidates Amine Gemayel and Nayla Mouawad. Yet we are not convinced that March 8 leaders seek genuine consensus. Their Syrian and Iranian backers probably hope to exploit the public yearning for a solution in order to dictate a presidential choice, who would be a consensus candidate in name only. Failing that, March 8 leaders -- and Michel Aoun -- would probably prefer vacuum or chaos to blame on March 14 stubbornness. Suggesting that acquiring trump cards is more important than achieving consensus, Nabih Berri insists that discussions toward a consensus president will begin only after March 14 agrees to conditions that ensure a March 8 veto.

¶2. (S) But let us assume that the two clashing political camps succumb to domestic and international pressure to discuss compromise figures. Each side has a different definition of who counts as a consensus choice (with Harb believing obsequiousness will lead Berri secretly to back him and Aoun deluding his cult-like inner circle that he occupies the halfway point between March 8 and 12). But, despite differences, there are five names mentioned frequently as potential consensus candidates: LAF Commander Michel Sleiman, Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh, MP Robert Ghanem, ex-Minister Michel Edde, and Maronite League head Joseph Torbey. We guess that Berri would add ex-Ministers Jean Obeid and Fares Bouez to the consensus list, and Patriarch Sfeir would include ex-Ambassador Simon Karam and ex-Minister Demianos Kattar. Minister of Justice Charles Rizk would add himself. Occasionally, bankers Francois Bassil and Farid Raphael are mentioned, as is, infrequently, Higher Judicial Council chief Antoine Kheir. Some even raise the unlikely possibility of luring Carlos Ghosn from Renault-Nissan to Baabda. The darkest horses in the consensus sweepstakes include beach resort owner Roger Edde and lawyer Chibli Mallat.

13. (S) At this point -- and until or unless other names emerge -- Sleiman, Salameh, Ghanem, Edde and Torbey probably have the best chance of branding themselves as the consensus candidate of choice acceptable to both camps (albeit begrudgingly in the March 14 case, given March 14 leaders' belief that they have the majority right to elect a president). We can't at this point predict the odds of who might prevail, or even if the consensus approach prevails over March 14 being able to elect one of its own. But in comparing the current choices, we can make a few observations about the behavior of the candidates in question. Our biggest concern is that all of the leading consensus candidates with the possible exception of Torbey (whose political views are largely unknown) have either documented or rumored ties to Syria that might make them vulnerable to interference. We also note that UN Special Coordinator to Lebanon Geir Pedersen believes that Sleiman and Salameh are the only two candidates acceptable to Hizballah, rendering them suspect.

-- LAF Commander Sleiman: In the aftermath of Nahr al-Barid, Sleiman is the most popular choice. He is a useful tool in deflating Michel Aoun, as many Aoun backers, including powerful MP Michel Murr, are ready to shift support to Sleiman. But Sleiman's record has been mixed over the past three years. On the one hand, in permitting (and even facilitating) the spring 2005 demonstrations including the famous March 14 rally, Sleiman defied Syrian orders. He also oversaw the historic LAF troop withdrawal to the south and (after initially blinking) the Nahr al-Barid fight. UNIFIL reports that he promotes active LAF-UNIFIL cooperation. On the other hand, his public statements have been among the worst of any GOL officials (going beyond what would be considered politically imperative), and the LAF under his command has done almost nothing to stop Hizballah weapons smuggling and transport. We cannot imagine he would be more

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forceful as president in implementing UNSCRs 1559 and 1701, especially if he owes Hizballah and Syria for helping to create his presidency. He is suspicious of March 14 and dislikes Siniora, who is openly contemptuous of Sleiman. To be president, Sleiman would require the same constitutional amendment passed for Emile Lahoud's first time, waiving the usual two-year cooling-off period before the army commander is eligible to become president. We cannot say with certainty what his current ties to Syria are, but we assume that they remain active.

-- Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh: Salameh enjoys an excellent international reputation in financial circles for having prevented Lebanon's financial meltdown. If examined closely, his methods may raise bankers' eyebrows, but they worked. His candidacy is pushed by Lebanon's financial and business circles, who cite a pragmatic, non-ideological approach and connections to all parties in Lebanon. But the number of rumors about Salameh's private life and his alleged cover-up of the Bank al-Medina scandal raise concerns about the potential for blackmail. Unsubstantiated stories circulate about trips to Damascus to advise the Asad family on banking and finance. Once a protege of Rafiq Hariri, in 2004 he was seen as having betrayed Hariri, when he secretly worked with Emile Lahoud to reschedule bonds in advance of their mature dates (and at higher interest costs that padded his banker friends' pockets); Hariri had planned to use the approaching financial crisis as leverage in his quiet campaign to prevent Lahoud's extension. Nevertheless, Salameh is very close to Rafiq's widow Nazek. Common wisdom is that he, too, would require a constitutional amendment to become president, although he makes an argument that the cooling-off period does not apply. PM Siniora and Salameh loathe each other, with each bearing grudges that date back years. While friendly to us, Salameh demonstrates a certain opaqueness, an ability to mask what he is really thinking or doing. As with Sleiman, we assume he maintains active ties to the Syrians.

-- MP Robert Ghanem: A long-time MP from West Biga', Ghanem comes from a part of Lebanon that has long been subject to heavy Syrian interference. While he voted against Emile Lahoud's extension in 2004 (as Ghanem wanted to become president himself), Ghanem sat out the spring 2005 demonstrations. Fellow Christian MPs who did join March 14 tended to forgive Ghanem at the time, noting that his district's location next to Syria explained his absence. By the 2005 legislative elections, he had thrown his lot in with the March 14 movement, successfully defending his parliamentary seat on a March 14 electoral list. As March 14 fortunes have fallen over the past year, however, Ghanem has tiptoed away, and he was not invited to the August meeting of March 14 Christians. Our sense is that Ghanem -- a decent man -- is politically opportunistic rather than ideological, malleable rather than principled. With his political base in the Biga', he will naturally work hard not to offend the Syrians. If the Syrians said "boo," he would be among the first to be rattled.

-- Former Minister Michel Edde: Now an octogenarian, Edde has sufficient wealth not to fall into the usual Lebanese temptations of using public office for private gain. A generous donor to the Maronite church and former head of the Maronite League, he has the "Christian weight" that most of the other consensus candidates lack, through a close, decades-long friendship with Patriarch Sfeir. The French are seduced by his happy gourmand profile, and he is generous and ecumenical with his private charity. He serves, for example, as the first non-Druse officer of the primary Druse charity in Lebanon, thanks to his financial support. But his attitude about Sunnis, and Palestinian Sunnis in general, verges on racism. He views most issues from a paranoid perspective of how to preserve the political powers of a diminishing and (in his view) embattled Maronite population. Perversely, this has led him to traditionally cozy relations with Hizballah and Syria (with rumored links to Mohammed Nassif Khayrbek), all of whom he sees as needed counterweights to Sunni power. His views of Sunnis approaches those of General Aoun, although the perpetually sunny Edde drops the vitriol Aoun applies. Infamously, he once said that he would throw his body down before the Syrian tanks to prevent them from leaving, leading to the current jokes that, after the Syrian withdrawal, when Edde comes to

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visit, he can slip in under the door without knocking.

-- Maronite League President Joseph Torbey: Torbey was elected as head of the Maronite League in May 2007, in a surprisingly heated race seen to have promoted him into the ranks of presidential contenders. A banker, Torbey was for years head of the Lebanese Bankers Association and previously Chairman of the Arab Bankers Association. His political views are not well known. He is head of Credit-Libanais Bank, which is majority Saudi-owned, leading some politicians to muse that he must lean in the direction of the Hariris and March 14. Yet his winning slate for the Maronite League board suggests a slight bias against March 14 (including, for example, LBC Chair Pierre Daher -- an enemy of Samir Geagea -- and Abdullah Bouhabib, close to former Deputy Prime Minister Issam Fares). But most observers feel he is pragmatic rather than political. Patriarch Sfeir has mentioned Torbey as an example of the "neutral" figure, "equal distance" from both March 8 and March 14 that Sfeir sees as needed to heal Lebanon's deep political divide.

14. (S) If we had voting power and were confined to these five consensus candidates, what would we think? Despite his current popularity, we would eliminate Sleiman immediately: After Emile Lahoud and the experience with Michel Aoun earlier, Lebanon could benefit from a civilian president. And, whatever Sleiman's admirable actions over the past three years, we believe pursuing an end to Hizballah's arms smuggling would be a particularly hard sell with him,

especially given his (accurate) suspicions about March 14's only reluctant support and trust of him. He sees Syria and Hizballah as more reliable allies, we believe. We would scratch Michel Edde's name off next, as someone who is well past his sell-by date. Much as we enjoy Edde's friendship and cuisine, it is difficult to pursue a constructive agenda with someone who does not pause to take a breath in his unending monologues on Lebanon's Christian identity. Edde's presidential ambitions are taken most seriously by those who wish a weak president or those who are counting on Edde's advanced age forcing an early vacancy in the office.

15. (S) As Saad Hariri pointed out himself (reftel), Robert Ghanem poses a challenge. He would not provide the strong leadership Lebanon needs in the years to come. But, as a decent man who did back the Special Tribunal (despite pervasive Syrian influence in his neighborhood), he would be an improvement over the incumbent in Baabda Palace. Unlike Emile Lahoud, Ghanem is not a believer in Syrian hegemony. Rather, our worries would be that his natural susceptibility to Syrian pressure would make him a facilitator of Syrian interests by default. We guess that Ghanem would try very hard to avoid conflict with either Syria or with us, making the choice of a PM all that much more important: the premier will have to help fill the leadership vacuum Ghanem is not prepared to fill. While we would be unexcited by the choice, Ghanem would not be a disaster, and it would be difficult to object to his candidacy, if he emerges out of a genuine consensus.

16. (S) Of all the five, Torbey and Salameh are probably the most modern thinkers, by virtue of their broad exposure in international business and financial circles. They have both been part of the financial establishment here that has kept Lebanon afloat despite the common belief that Lebanon should have collapsed financially years ago. In fact, the financial concerns would probably keep both Torbey and Salameh leaning toward the west, despite Syrian pressures and whatever vulnerabilities they have, since neither would want to preside over Lebanon's bankruptcy. Financial pressure, in other words, could be a useful deterrent on either from going too far with the Syrians. Besides rumors of Syrian connections and some unsavory personal and business practices, Salameh faces the additional burdens of a constitutional amendment (at least according to most observers) and the hatred of Siniora. But, with Torbey such an unknown figure, we would probably, and without enthusiasm, end up backing Salameh as the least risky of the five.

17. (S) Unfortunately, none of these five candidates are statesmen. The exercise of examining potential compromise candidates reinforces our first impression that none of the consensus names currently in circulation indicate the type of exciting, dynamic leaders that would be ideal to move Lebanon

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forward. But the desire to pull Lebanon backwards, toward renewed Syrian hegemony, is surely what motivates Syria's agents here to object so strenuously to candidates like Nassib Lahoud who are. Lackluster as candidates like Salameh and Ghanem are, they at least would not willingly participate in facilitating the return of Syrian occupation of Lebanon.

18. (S) Much can happen between now and the expiration of Emile Lahoud's presidential term at midnight on November 23. But, for now, a consensus solution for the presidency appears able merely to prevent immediate chaos and violence, not to deal decisively with Lebanon's long-term problems. A consensus president prevents the emergence of a new crisis but is unlikely to have the influence to solve the existing problems. If there is a consensus president from the list we have provided here, we should keep our fingers crossed that Lebanon's next prime minister is a strong, decisive figure to help compensate for the weakness in Baabda Palace. We have a sinking feeling that, with a weak compromise figure as president, Lebanon would be no more able to resolve the

issues facing it than under the current dysfunctional line-up.
FELTMAN